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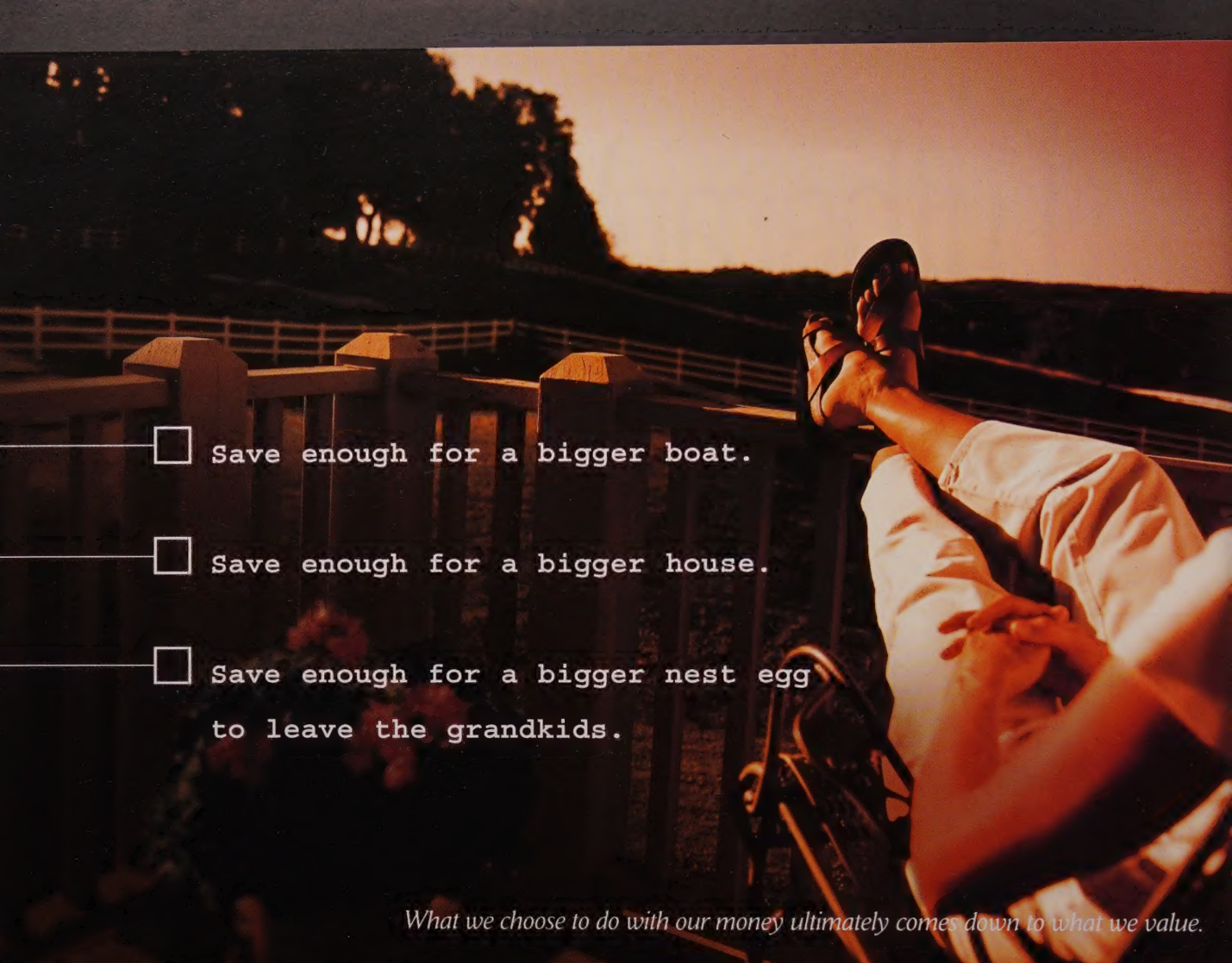
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GOD IN THE EVERYDAY

All of us have routines in our lives, and we naturally tend to take them for granted: the rising sun, a pot of hot coffee, our daily bread, the presence of one another. It's easy not to notice the wonder and marvel of God in everyday events, things, people, and experiences. How do we awaken ourselves to God's presence in the dailiness of life?

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Prayer connects us to God and one another. When we pray for others, we hold them up to the One who knows best how to help. *Joyce M. Bowers*

Embracing God's goodness, we find meaning on life's journey as well as in the final destination. *Sonia C. Solomonson*

Discernment is about listening for God's guidance regularly—something each of us can do. Enjoy an excerpt from Farrington's new book and discover a resource created especially for Women of the ELCA. *Debra K. Farrington*

Who or what are angels? A look at the messengers among us. *Clare La Plante*

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Valuable information for every reader.



The Most Wonderful Time of the Year

by Nancy Goldberger

Do you have a favorite season? Mine has always been autumn. To me, the weather is perfect. The days are long and sunny; the nights a touch cool. The air even smells different. Yes, the newness of spring is delightful, the warmth of summer welcome, and the snow-painted landscapes of winter awe-inspiring. But for me, autumn is the most wonderful time of year.

What never fails to surprise me each year at this time is that I so strongly identify with the fall. I feel highly attuned to all around me. I seem to feel more, to see more, to even *be* more. Why this is, I do not know. While I do not pretend to understand all that happens for me in the fall, I can still appreciate it.

Of course, on the work-related front, September is a wonderful time as well. Not only did we unveil the revised *Lutheran Woman Today* format in the September issue three years ago, September also marks the beginning of our new Bible study. It is a delight to share this year's study with you. What you may not know is that *Everyday Surprises: The Parables of Jesus* has been already been enthusiastically received by hundreds of people.

"What?" you may be thinking. "Isn't this a new study written exclusively for *LWT*?" Yes, it is. But a good number of *LWT* readers and others have taken advantage not only of the online preview of the first session of the study, but have attended a Bible study introductory event. And they loved it! Author Audrey

West has addressed groups at these events at Wartburg Seminary in Dubuque, Iowa, and at Luther Seminary in St. Paul, Minnesota. She has spoken or will be speaking at Synodical Women's Organization events from Washington to Arkansas to Oregon. After each event, we have heard the most marvelous feedback, including genuine delight in the material and the way it is presented in the study. We hope you love it, too.

As a special note, we send our sincere thanks to the Charity Circle at Zion Lutheran in Woodville, Wisconsin, for informative and helpful feedback as we prepared this Bible study. Your willingness to preview the study was a wonderful, supportive gesture from which we will all benefit. Thank you.

This issue of *LWT* also brings a wealth of articles exploring different aspects of our theme: God in the everyday. All of us have routines in our lives, and we naturally tend to take them for granted: the rising sun, a pot of hot coffee, our daily bread, the presence of one another. It's easy not to notice the wonder and marvel of God in everyday events, things, people, and experiences. How do we awaken ourselves to God's presence in the dailiness of life?

As you read through Clare La Plante's article on angels, or Linda Witte Henke's reflections on yeast and bread, we think you'll agree: September is a great time of year.

Peace, Nancy Goldberger, editor

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GIVE US THIS DAY

Everyday Miracles

by Marj Leegard

"AS LONG AS THE EARTH REMAINS, THERE WILL BE PLANTING AND HARVEST, COLD AND HEAT; WINTER AND SUMMER, DAY AND NIGHT" GENESIS 8:22 (CEV).

Do you ever fuss because you want to see a miracle? Really see an angel? Do you long for a sign to bolster your faith? If I told you that miracles abound under our feet, over our heads, and within reach of our hands, would you believe me?

Harvest time is God's gift that follows planting. For some of us harvest is just a lovely word; for others a daily event. When we take a potato dug from our own garden and brush away the soil, harvest has meaning. From a bit of potato put into the ground in the chill of spring has come a kettle full! Now we understand harvest. It is not so easy to feel the fullness of harvest in a cardboard box of dried potato flakes. For those who walk on concrete and polished wood there is little difference between soil, dirt, and land. And yet the God of Old Testament and New lives also in the nuances of planting and harvest, soil and land.

We plant in anticipation of increase, and God gives harvest in anticipation of gratitude.

On the farm, harvest was exciting. It was a time of sharing labor in the field and in the kitchen. There was a great commotion when the threshing rig came into the barnyard and aimed the straw pipe in the direction of the old straw pile. The grain wagon pulls into place, waiting for the first flow of bright kernels of grain. It is not enough to look. One must also smell the dust and the smoke, feel the warmth of the sun still held in the autumn harvest, and then taste the grain. Chew

carefully a grain of wheat, and know that our God of harvest is present.

In the kitchen when the last dish is dried and preparations for feeding the crew again tomorrow are well underway, there is time to step outside to see the huge gold harvest moon and feel the cool breeze, even more welcome after the heat of the day. And God is present. God, who holds the universe in tension of day and night; planting and harvest; earth, sun, and moon, holds my everlasting life in promise.

And I should be wishing for more miracles and signs? If I go to the chapel that is my garden, sometimes I see perfection in even rows and freshly tilled earth; more often, it flourishes in disarray with bushes and vines and daring weeds growing in all directions. When the garden is under a snow bank, the memory of summer lives on in the harvest. Jars of strawberry preserves and pungent relish and pickles and tomatoes bring summer back in each bite. These are *harvest* long after the harvest moon gives way to the cold sun dogs of winter.


In our chapels made with human hands, God longs for gratitude and awe. Music soars and prayers rise but our feet are separated from the earth. From the miracle of planting and harvest.

There is a hymn (LBW 463), "Great creator, still creating, show us what we yet may do." May we share the gift of gratitude with those who have no garden.

LWT columnist Marj Leegard and her husband, Jerome, live in Detroit Lakes, Minn.

Intercessor

Praying on Behalf of Others



by Joyce M. Bowers

ONE OF MY FAVORITE NORMAN ROCKWELL ILLUSTRATIONS SHOWS A LITTLE GIRL HOLDING HER "SICK" DOLL UP BEFORE A COUNTRY DOCTOR. HE REWARDS HER CHILDLIKE FAITH, SOLEMNLY CHECKING THE DOLL WITH HIS STETHOSCOPE.

WHEN WE ARE INTERCESSORS AND PRAY FOR OTHERS, WE HOLD THEM UP BEFORE THE GREAT PHYSICIAN, WHO KNOWS BETTER THAN WE HOW TO HELP THEM—WHO REWARDS OUR CHILD-LIKE FAITH WITH DEEPER LOVE THAN EVEN THE MOST COMPASSIONATE COUNTRY DOCTOR.

Caring and praying for people in need is a vital ministry in every congregation. Those who have been on the receiving end often say they can't adequately express how important it was to their healing to receive pastoral visits, cards, and the prayers of others in the congregation.

Exodus 17 provides a striking image of intercessory prayer. Not long after the people of Israel had escaped slavery in Egypt and crossed the Red Sea, they were attacked by the fierce warriors of Amalek.

Moses had a two-pronged response. He sent Joshua and selected warriors to fight the enemy in a valley. Moses took his miracle-working staff and went up on nearby mountain with two assistants, Aaron and Hur, to invoke God's presence and power. As long as Moses' arms were raised in prayer, the Israelites prevailed, but when he lowered his arms, the enemy regained power.

Moses became exhausted and his arms drooped, but Aaron and Hur stood by and upheld Moses' arms until Israel won the battle. It took both prayer and the skilled effort of professionals to overcome the threat.

As I consider being an intercessor, I can't imagine daring to argue and bargain with God as Abraham did on behalf of Sodom and Gomorrah (see Genesis 18), but I can imagine assisting someone else's prayer as Aaron and Hur did if that will release the power of God to act on behalf of God's beloved people. That is the essence of intercessory prayer.

If I don't know what to pray for, I can simply bring the person with me into God's presence, much as people brought sick friends and relatives to Jesus for healing and blessing. There the Spirit of God is free to work—sometimes to bring physical healing, and sometimes in other ways—to make broken things whole.

There are many ways to carry out a vital prayer ministry in the congregation. The following stories provide living examples to encourage our faithfulness in prayer.

Dagny Weiss A CENTURY OF PRAYER

Celebrating volunteer ministries is an annual event in my congregation. Our volunteer coordinator reads an astonishingly long list of ministries and asks volunteers to come forward to receive a hearty handshake, a personal thank-you, and a token of appreciation.

One special person who has an essential ministry in the congregation is unable to walk forward, though she attends church nearly every Sunday. Her name is Dagny Weiss, and at age 101, her legs no longer carry her very well. Her ministry? Prayers for the pastor, the congregation, and anyone she knows is in need.

Dagny was born in 1903 into a family of Norwegian Lutherans. She learned to pray from her mother and in her congregation, Norwegian

Lutheran Memorial Church in Chicago. She loved church and all things Norwegian. On Syttende Mai (17th of May, Norwegian Independence Day), Dagny dressed in colorful traditional garb and marched in the Norwegian parade.

As a teenager, Dagny began making meticulous, detailed pencil drawings of Christ. The hours it took her to complete each drawing invited her into contemplation of the One she cherished. It was then that

Attending church every Sunday was a given, and Dagny was always ready to help anyone in need. She continued to make portraits of Christ and gave them to family, friends, and churches. Many congregations in Chicago—not all Lutheran—have Dagny’s drawings gracing their walls.

Dagny continued making original drawings of Christ until she was 94, when her hands could no longer do fine work. Now Dagny gives away reproductions of her pictures. And she still prays morning and evening without fail. Her congregation, Grace Lutheran Church in Mt. Prospect, Illinois, and her pastor, Peter Hellstedt, are at the top of her prayer list. Pastor Hellstedt says, “Dagny tells me—often—that she prays for me every morning before she gets up

and every night before she goes to bed. I know I am not the only one she prays for, by any means. Such prayer, I am convinced, makes a difference in the life of the congregation. I know her prayers make a difference for me personally.”

Dagny looks forward with fervent hope to the day she will meet her Lord and be united with the One she loves above all others. She sometimes asks, “Why am I still here?” and is reminded, “God still has work for you here. We need your prayers.”

Don & Charlene Breede LINKING OTHERS TO GOD

Don Breede despaired of life. He had been diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, which has a four-percent survival rate. Surgery to remove his pancreas and several other organs, plus aggressive chemotherapy and radiation, left him depressed and depleted, having pared 80 pounds from his average-size frame. “The only thing that pulled me through,” Don says quietly, “was prayer.”

This type of cancer is usually not diagnosed until it is advanced, and for most people (including Cardinal

SHE SOMETIMES ASKS, “WHY AM I STILL HERE?” AND IS REMINDED, “GOD STILL HAS WORK FOR YOU HERE. WE NEED YOUR PRAYERS.”

Dagny began the practice she has continued for eight decades—making portraits of Christ to give to people in need, to encourage them in their faith, or simply as heartfelt gifts to people she cares about. Dagny’s prayers accompany each picture.

PRAYER-FILLED

Dagny married Louis Weiss in 1922, and soon became the full-time mother of two active boys, Lou and Jerry. Home and family kept her busy. She became known for her excellent Norwegian cooking, especially time-consuming dishes like *lapskaus* (a traditional stew), *lutefisk* (fish), and *fattigmann* (a fried confection). She was generous with her delicious bread, and gave away hundreds of freshly baked loaves.

In 1958 Dagny was diagnosed with colon cancer, and the next year her husband died at the age of 50. Daughter-in-law Lill Weiss says, “Those were rough years, but Dagny kept us all going with her strong faith and her prayer. She has lived with a colostomy for nearly half a century. She’s a tough lady!”

Joseph Bernardin) death comes within four months of the diagnosis. Don's cancer had been discovered earlier, which made it treatable. Now a one-year survivor, he is hopeful of being one of the four percent.

The prayers that pulled Don through were not his own—he was too sick and depressed to pray. They were the prayers of members of the prayer chain at Edison Park Lutheran Church in Chicago, along with those of the many others who joined in as word of Don's illness spread. Don received notes and e-mail messages from places as far away as Argentina and the Vatican. He says, "It was so beneficial to know people were praying. It was amazing to me, how many people prayed for me. Prayer gives hope and strength and helps you heal."

Don's wife, Charlene Breede, is a coordinator of the prayer chain at Edison Park. She knows there is tremendous power in prayer. A five-year cancer survivor, she is kind and compassionate, and quickly tunes in to the needs of others. She says, "Upholding each other in prayer is what the Body of Christ is about. Prayers and cards are so comforting when you are ill. They bring hope and peace, and help you have a positive attitude."

"There is so little you can do when someone is sick," Charlene says. "When people are ill, you want to help. You say, 'Please let me know if you need anything,' but usually there isn't really much you can do. But you can pray; it is a way to give real help."

"You often don't know what to say to a person who is ill or in crisis," she continues. "But you can say, 'I'll pray for you,' and that is meaningful both to the person doing the praying and the person prayed for. Prayer is an important ministry of the congregation, one that can be done by people who have limited ability to be active; they can do it at home."

A COMMUNITY COMMITTED

The prayer ministry at Edison Park was organized about three years ago by Karen Aldrich, Advocate par-

ish nurse for the congregation. It began as a telephone prayer chain, but now a growing number of people receive requests via e-mail.

People fill out request cards on Sunday and drop them in a box, or they leave requests on Karen's voice mail. Each Monday, Karen collects the requests and calls Charlene. Then they each call several people to begin the chains. Confidentiality and avoiding gossip are important. Only first names are used, and sometimes no name at all. As Charlene says, "God knows who we are praying for."

Members of the prayer chain are asked to write down the requests so they will have accurate information. Each one calls the next person on the chain and also prays for the requests. Charlene keeps the list of requests with her and continues to pray throughout the week.

People are encouraged to report answers to prayer such as healing or encouragement; then the prayers include thanksgiving and praise. Charlene reflects, "We never understand why disasters or personal tragedies happen, but we know God is with us. When we pray, God makes his presence known, bringing hope and encouragement."

The prayer chain has inspired Don to learn more about prayer and about God. He and Pastor John Linn are reading *Centered Living: The Way of Centering Prayer* by M. Basil Pennington (Liguori, 1999) because Don is interested in growing in his own faith and prayer. They discuss the book over lunch.

Illness and prayer have shaped the lives and strengthened the faith of Don and Charlene Breede. They now have a mission to pass that strength on to others.

Joyce M. Bowers works in the ELCA Foundation in Chicago and enjoys writing and editing. She is blessed to be a part of Grace Lutheran Church, Mt. Prospect, Ill., where she makes banners and where intercessory prayer is practiced regularly.

Grace for the Journey

by Sonia C. Solomonson



Our Experiences Offer Growth and Gifts

"Life is a journey, not a destination." I recall seeing a poster years ago that showed this message superimposed on a road winding through a scenic countryside.

I was much younger then, busy raising three bright and active boys, two of whom are now fathers themselves. What did I know of life's journey then?

Now, a broken heart, a divorce, a new life, a new career, several moves, and seven grandchildren later, I have learned what many of you also know: The journey really *does* matter. As Christians, we know that our destination matters, too. But our faith journey offers many lessons as we walk toward that goal. Some are born of the ordinary moments of everyday life and some of life's more earthshaking and heartbreaking events—the death of a loved one, devastating illness, or divorce, for example. Our faith profoundly affects how we see both those events and life's daily routines. And those experiences in turn affect our faith.

Sometimes we live with hearts open to the everyday joys that surround us. We notice the tiniest flower emerging through a crack in the sidewalk. Or we stop and listen to the early morning concert by birds eager for a new day. We pay attention and

we live with gratefulness to the God who lavishes such gifts upon us. This nourishes our faith.

Conversely, other times we live with hearts full of sourness, lingering over each little irritant as carefully as a chef testing a new recipe. The children squabble over breakfast. The morning commute is infuriating. The post-office lines are long, and the postal worker is surly when we finally get to the counter. Some days those little things pile up until our frayed nerves snap. Days like this are part of our faith journey, too.

through both the joyful events we embrace or the painful ones we reluctantly endure.

Our faith, planted when we were washed in baptismal waters, is nurtured not only in worship, daily meditation, loving relationships, and many other positive experiences, it's also nurtured in life's challenging and difficult times—those twists and turns in our path. Our experience of life is more circular than direct. Sometimes we double back over ground we thought we'd already walked.

am aware of my new role as teller of our family's stories so my sons and their children can know their father and grandfather as he was when he was a young husband and father.

I could not have known what his death would mean. Nor do we have any idea what unknown joys—or sorrows—await us around the next bend.

But we do know one thing: The God whose extravagant love surrounds us *does care* about every event in our day and *does offer* an abundance of grace through

We notice the tiniest flower emerging through a crack in the sidewalk. Or we stop and listen to the early morning concert by birds eager for a new day.

At the end of such days, we can pray in the words from *A New Zealand Prayer Book*: "It is night after a long day. What has been done has been done; what has not been done has not been done; let it be. . . . Let us look expectantly to a new day, new joys, new possibilities."

When we see God as an integral part of our everyday life, we know that whatever happens, good or bad, we are held in God's hand. Further, we know that we can experience transformation and growth

When my former husband died suddenly two years ago, the fresh grief of his death merged with old pain that I had thought was long since put to rest. New insights and old memories surfaced. In addition to the pain of witnessing my children's deep grief, I was returning to old ground, with some new twists. Out of that experience, however, grace continues to flow. I have a new sense of the goodness that was in that relationship. I also have a new sense of forgiveness and grace about its failure. And I

those events. When we live each day in close touch with this God, our experiences can be opportunities to become more of who God created us to be. As we bring all of who we are to that relationship—our successes and failures, our joys and sorrows, our hopes and fears, our praise and lament—God offers growth. And like the mustard seed in Jesus' parable, our faith grows beyond anything we imagined.

Sonia C. Solomonson is managing editor of *The Lutheran*.

LISTENING TO GOD

EVERYDAY DISCERNMENT

by Debra K. Farrington



It's a big word, discernment, a word we mostly associate with deciding to enter ordained ministry. We don't usually go around asking each other, "So, how's your discerning with God going today?" But, you know, that might not be a bad idea, because discernment isn't just for clergy, and it isn't just for special occasions. Discernment is about listening for God's guidance regularly—something each of us can do. It's about learning to hear with your heart. Think of it as God's invitation to you to help in the work of creation, and not just once in a while, but all the time.

The following is an excerpt from one of my recent books, *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life*.

Often the discussion of discernment seems to imply that discernment has to do with life's big decisions, such as marriage or vocation. Yet, although seeking God's guidance for major decisions is certainly appropriate and wise, we need not save discernment for those big moments. It would probably be silly, not to mention time-consuming, to try to discern whether parking your car in this place or that helps further heaven on earth, but it is important to discern what to do with the gifts—financial and otherwise—that we possess. How and when to pray; how to treat others; how to nurture friendships, our spiritual lives, our employees and colleagues;

how to vote; how to help those in our communities who have few resources; how to spend the money we have—all these activities and decisions benefit from prayer and conversation with God. In this way, each of us is called to be a partner, or co-creator, with God in building up our world.

Each of us, as God's co-creator, must take responsibility for listening for God's guidance. No one can do that for us. And we must take responsibility for acting on that guidance as well. Imagine what the world would become if we all—every creature—truly felt like partners with God in creating heaven on earth.

Perhaps it seems prideful to think that you have a role to play in bringing about the kind of world that God truly desires. But you bear no more and no less responsibility than every other living being in the world. God desires that we all play our part in coming into our own as a co-creator with God. And once we have experienced God as a deity who loves us unconditionally, as God our Beloved, then it is only natural to want, for the world, what God wants. Much as we want what is best for our children, our partners, and close friends, then we must also share and act on God's will for a just and beautiful creation.

I once heard that winds around the world are capable of bringing dust from Africa to Colorado. No country or people can isolate themselves as easily as they might think. Acting, or not acting on

WE CAN HELP BRING INTO BEING A WORLD
WHERE PEACE, LOVE, AND CHARITY RULE,
WHERE WE ACTUALLY EMBODY GOD.

God's behalf works much the same way. When we do something hateful, hurtful, and cruel to someone else, that act, or the spirit of it, spreads from the victim to someone else, and it ripples outward like the small waves made by a stone thrown in a pond. When we practice kindness, concern, and graciousness, the same is true. It spreads to others. Each act is just a small thing, but it can further God's will or help to defeat it.

As overwhelming as it that sounds, if we don't help build up the earth, we are part of the world's problems of violence, hatred, cruelty, and carelessness. As Catholic priest William Barry says, when we give up trying to help and write off the possibilities of our being co-creator with God as naïve, doing so "sanctions the *status quo* of mistrust and enmity between people whom God wants to be brothers and sisters and it takes us off the hook of trying to find ways to live out God's dream."¹ Idealistic as it may seem, without our cooperation and assistance, God cannot continue to create a world of justice and love.

If we choose to be co-creators (and it is a choice; God does not coerce our cooperation), we can help bring into being a world where peace, love, and charity rule, where we actually embody God. We become God's hands and feet and voices. So when we help clean rubbish off the beach, work at the local soup kitchen, comfort someone who mourns, or delight in someone's accomplishments—and other everyday kinds of activities—we give God a body in this world. In doing these things, and so many others, we take action on what God wills for us and for the world, and we remember and fulfill our role as co-creators.

That does not imply that we spend every moment of every day trying to discern whether or not or how to do the tasks in front of us. I do not look at every single piece of correspondence that I

receive in a day and spend a half hour discerning how God would have me answer this or that e-mail. But to live as God would have us live, we need to learn to listen, see, and feel with our hearts. Once we have begun to listen and see with our new ears and eyes we can more easily look at the tasks or needs in front of us, and choose to act in a way that is in accordance with God's deepest desires.

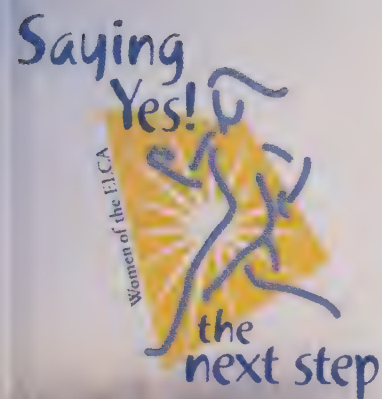
In the coming year many of you will be using a resource called "Listening to God: A Guide for Discernment," which I wrote for the Women of the ELCA. This booklet introduces some of the spiritual, intellectual, and community practices that help us be better discerners, women more able to hear God's desires with our hearts and respond. Prayer, learning to pay attention—to ourselves and to God—studying Scripture and God's actions in the world, and sharing what we are hearing with others are all part of discernment. "Listening to God" explores how to use those practices in order to listen well and discover what God calls you to do and be as individuals and as women's groups within your churches. I hope that your exploration of discernment proves to be a fruitful practice this year, one that results in an open heart that hears God's desires well.

Debra K. Farrington is a writer, retreat leader, and popular speaker on Christian spirituality. She is the author of *Hearing with the Heart: A Gentle Guide to Discerning God's Will for Your Life and Learning to Hear with the Heart: Meditations for Discerning God's Will*.

NOTES

1. William A. Barry, *Paying Attention to God: Discernment in Prayer* (Notre Dame, 1990), p. 60.

Excerpted from *Hearing with the Heart* by Debra Farrington (January 2003, \$19.95, Cloth) by permission of Jossey Bass/A Wiley Imprint.



Journey with Women of the ELCA as we continue to respond to our 2002-2005 triennium theme, "Listen, God is calling."

Grab a friend, come as a group, or simply treat yourself to

"Saying Yes! the next step"

Plan now on attending one of these retreat-style events, held at a variety of locations across the country. See below for a location near you!

Don't miss your chance to meet other women of the church, be uplifted, and be inspired. The adventure begins on Friday at 7 p.m. and ends by noon on Sunday.

A \$65 registration fee includes lunch on Saturday, materials, and break-time refreshments. Hotel accommodations and transportation are additional (special hotel rates have been negotiated).

For more information and to register on-line go to www.womenoftheelca.org or get information and registration forms by calling 800-638-3522, ext 2741. Most major credit cards accepted.

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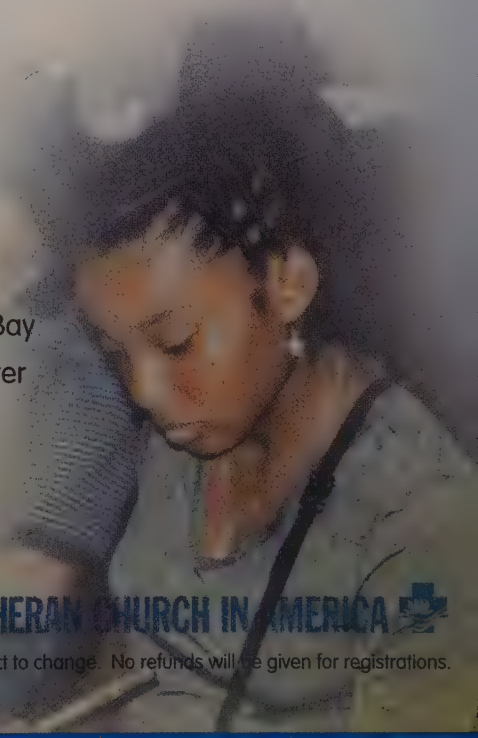
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A person with large, white, feathered angel wings is walking away from the viewer down a city street. The person is wearing a dark hoodie, dark pants, and white sneakers. They are holding a thin, dark cane or stick in their right hand. The street is paved with cobblestones or similar material. In the background, there are buildings, trees, and street signs, including one that says "STREET CLEANING" and another with a "P" symbol. The overall tone of the image is somewhat somber and contemplative.

CALLING ALL Angels

GRACE IN AN UNLIKELY PACKAGE

by Dave La Plante

I CONFESS: I'VE BEEN AN ANGEL SNOB. When I was out promoting the two books on saints I co-wrote, I was always offended when someone introduced me as an author of books on angels. Not angels, I would say, *saints*—the scholars, the martyrs, the Church doctors, the intellectual heavies and moral lions—not those stumbling, unkempt men in *It's a Wonderful Life* or *Michael*, or those cuddly little gold-

haloed cherubs that we hang from Christmas trees.

And yet I have a wooden carving of an angel on my office wall. Below that, on my bookcase, stands a glass candle holder with an angel on the front—hands in prayer, gold halo, a Christmas gift from someone who thought I wrote about angels.

Hanging in my hallway at home is an inexpensive mirror with sensual Raphael-looking angels in

gold, a bit of rococo frou-frou—my sister helped me pick it out for my first home. And on a ledge in the kitchen there's a hand-painted angel from South America, with a wing that broke when I accidentally knocked her off her perch.

I thought I was holding onto all these angels because they reminded me of the people who gave them to me, they helped fill up wall space, or I was too lazy to get rid of them. And then the opportunity to write this article came my way. I began to think that angels have a way of showing up in our lives. Then I started to study up on angels.

WHO OR WHAT ARE ANGELS?

Angels are messengers from God, carrying messages back and forth, like Mercury in ancient myth. (Early Christian art didn't portray angels with wings so the viewing public wouldn't confuse them with pagan gods.) The word *angel* comes from the Greek *angelos*, likely a translation of the Hebrew word *mal'akh*, meaning messenger.

They're ecumenical. In the Old Testament, it was an angel who told Abraham and Sarah that they were finally to be parents. And it was the Archangel Gabriel who revealed the Koran to Mohammad. Gabriel also was the one who told Mary she would give birth to a son.

We have angels who are known by name—Abariel, Ruhel, Uriel—and others who are known only as part of a group, such as the 70 angels said to be present at childbirth. According to the tradition, there's a hierarchy in the angel world—a celestial ranking, so to speak—with the seraphim and cherubim at the top, and the simple angels at the bottom—the closest to human beings.

In addition to being part of many events at the source of the great faiths, like the Annunciation or Mohammad's discovery of the Koran, angels are

often present in the great conversion stories, such as Jacob's wrestling match, when he struggled with a celestial being until dawn. Or Saul on the road to Damascus, an implacable persecutor until he was knocked to the ground by an angel's voice of truth. These angels have a fierceness about them, which is part of being a messenger.

When I began writing this piece I realized that I had mostly thought of angels as engineers of happy endings. They guarded lost children. They saved trapped miners. They prevented car accidents. They reunited lovers. I hadn't really considered fallen angels, or the ones who must deliver bad news with good grace. Or the ones we struggle with until dawn, like Jacob, in order to be free.

ANGELS IN A DIFFERENT LIGHT

I began to realize that angels are ambiguous—neither fish nor fowl. Human form? Some say never, others say often. Spirits? Of course, but how, why, and when? But one thing seems clear to people of all times and belief systems, even our modern, secular one: Angels only show up when something vitally important is at stake.

I think that no matter the outcome of what angels announce, they promise a measure of grace with it. Think of Abraham and how God tested him by ordering him to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac. Think of Mary, whose beloved son was sacrificed. They had the grace to accept God's word and God's ways, no matter how incomprehensible, and still keep faith with God.

We all need a measure of grace to help us accept God's word and God's ways and keep faith with God. And we need a lot of angels. Even though there are some angels—such as Gabriel, or the angel who met Abraham and Sarah—who fulfill their angel duties whether we're looking for them or not, most

of us catch the angels' message of grace only if we open our eyes and reach out for it. Saint Augustine said it well: Although angels are spirits, it is not because they are spirits that they are angels. *"They become angels when they are sent. The name angel refers to their office, not to their nature."*

We're not spirits, but we can help out with that office—we can do the work that needs to be done—like the nurse with a cast on her foot who stood most of the night and took care of me in the hospital, or the immigrant man working at the pizza joint who spotted my No War button and kissed his fingers, held them to his gold cross, and flashed me the peace sign last winter when I thought no one around me cared. If you're an angel, you're willing to extend yourself.

WHERE ANGELS TREAD

Mr. Rogers—an angel if there ever was one—was sent to me in book form to comfort me as I mourned a recent loss. I read that sweet book over and over again. One passage in Mr. Rogers' book stayed with me: When he was a little boy, Fred Rogers wrote, his mother told him to always look for the helpers in any tragedy—in war, in accidents, in gruesome acts that humans commit against each other. Look for the helpers, his mother told him, you'll always find them. Aha, I thought, those are the angels.

The friend who calls unbidden when you don't know where else to turn, a second chance at a relationship, a traffic cop easing the gridlock downtown, an efficient and friendly clerk at the tax assessor's office when you're nearly at the end of your rope, a song that speaks for you right when you can't find your own words, a dream that prompts you to call someone who needs you, a moment of grace when you're steeped in grief. Without faith, an angel can look like a coincidence.

Of course, we can use angels to deny the messiness of life—which was my aversion to them in the first place. No amount of fluffy little angels can give anyone the final "happy" ending. We all die in human form. No amount of angels—cutely dressed, tidily placed around my home—can protect me from the sorrows of this existence.

Instead, we must be willing to wrestle with our angels, to let them show up to help us, to let them show up to give us the news—no matter what it is—and hope that every time we let in grace, it allows us to be a messenger of love for somebody else.

A JOURNEY TOGETHER

We've all been Saul on that road to Damascus, so ferociously sure of ourselves and our explanations. We've all needed at one time or another to be knocked off our high horse by faith.

I wonder what happens to an angel messenger if we close our eyes to it, or try to avoid it? The bigger question is what happens to us. I think we become like little roly-poly bugs, rolling ourselves up so tightly in our armored shells to protect ourselves that we become unrecognizable, a parody of a human being, just as our little greeting-card cherubs have become parodies of angels.

Instead, let's be open. Let's be open to the fierce, gentle, ugly, beautiful, and unexpected angels all around us—and to ourselves. I like to think of angels as the torchbearers. Each of us, at some point in our lives, must be willing to take up the torch the angels hand us—the fire of faith that passes from one to another, lighting the darkness of the world, slowly and surely, reminding all of us that we can't do it alone, and we aren't meant to.

Clare La Plante is a writer in Chicago.

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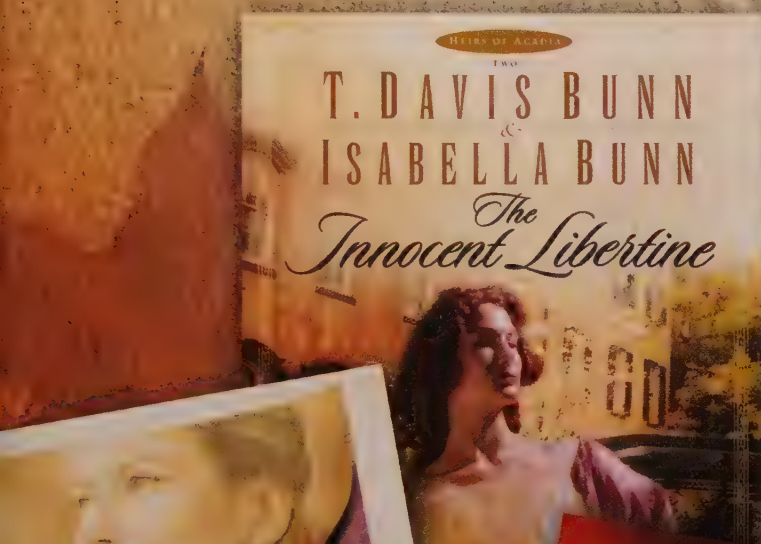
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Life in the Parentheses

by Anne Basye

I HATE WAITING. When my son was small and my divorce fresh, no minutes were more excruciating than the ones between the time my former husband said he'd bring Alex home, and the time he'd finally show up. About 15 minutes before he was due to arrive, I'd get up from my desk, walk to the window, and glance out. Take up a chore, put it down, and go back to the window for a second look. Pick up another task, take another look. And so on, restlessly. I couldn't concentrate on anything until Alex was home and the parentheses of waiting were closed.

Meanwhile, I worried. It was the transition, not the absence, that bothered me. As long as I was reasonably sure Alex was safely occupied somewhere—at school, with his dad—I felt secure. But let him be late, and my security crumbled. Waiting turned into worry, worry into agony. Years of practice never narrowed that aching gap between now and when.

This year, I can feel that gap getting ready to widen alarmingly. Although it's only September, part of me is already at the window, getting a head start on the next big wait: Alex graduating from high school next spring, going away to college, and not really “coming home” ever again.

Readers, indulge me. I know his departure next summer won't be final, and I won't spend the next eleven months fretting. And really, who am I worrying about? This empty-nest business will transform two people, not just one. An open door for Alex is an open door for me. Talk about an alarming notion!

Since Alex's birth, the bottom line for me has always been: I'm a mom, and at the end of the day, I have to get dinner on the table. Even the hardest moments of

parenting have been a privilege, and yet I know that motherhood has sheltered me as much as it has defined me. It has allowed me to fend off possibilities with obligations. And now “dinner on the table” is about to expire as a credible excuse.

Waiting and worrying are seductive. They lure us out of the present. They come naturally to parents, because so much of parenting is about the future. In some places, desperate mothers have to sell their bodies for food to keep their children alive another day. You'd think as the mother of a child with a full stomach, I would be a little more relaxed—but no.

I once heard greed defined as the unwillingness to let the future unfold by itself and the desire to bring the future into the present, right now. Viewed this way, perhaps all my efforts, from remembering doctor's appointments to saving for college, have been more about controlling than preparing for Alex's future.

I can't control the future. My real task this year is to stop fretting by the window, and start greeting and embracing two futures with confidence. For two of us are moving away. Alex, leaving childhood for maturity, is brimming with excitement about the years ahead. I, moving away from hands-on parenting, am a tad less enthusiastic. With no spouse to consult and no more children to raise, I'll need to imagine myself all over again, almost from scratch.

Life always takes courage, but this transition will demand bravery I don't yet possess. Worrying about someone else is so ingrained; how can I stop? I learned from masters like my grandfather, a Swedish-American doctor with a keen grasp of the possibilities for disaster.

Told of one of my youthful accomplishments, he replied, "That's nice. I hope she doesn't get multiple sclerosis."

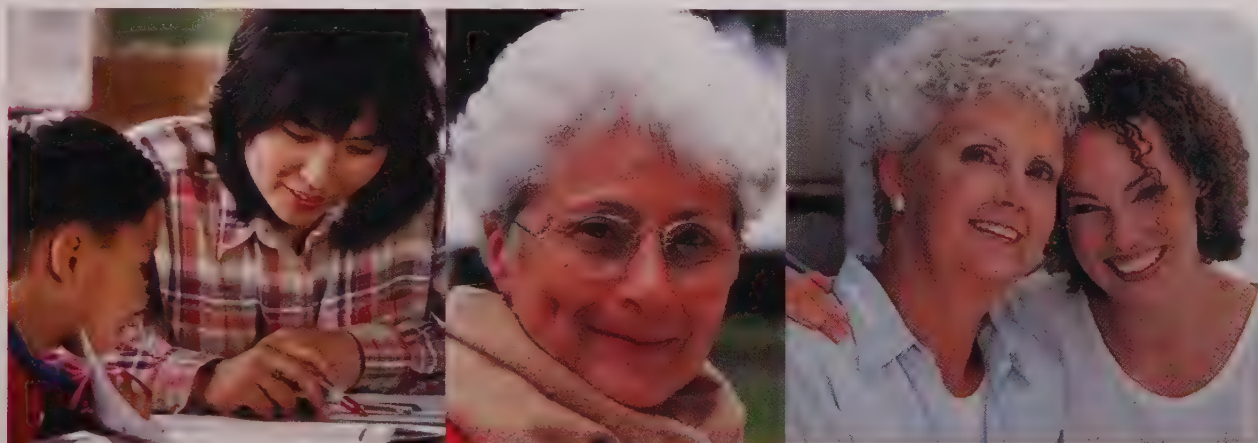
Today his comment makes a funny family story, but it's no way to acknowledge a milestone. I'm praying for the courage to greet Alex's firsts with a big smile, whether he says, "Guess what, I'm going to Yale!" or "Check out the Harley I bought with the college money! I'm off to Tierra del Fuego!"

The milestones ahead of me may be more subtle than Alex's, but they too beg to be welcomed with joy and delight, not doubt and reluctance. I pray that as I learn to revel in Alex's new life, I can revel in my

own—and be just as compassionate about the mistakes each of us is bound to make in our separate but intertwined lives.

No matter how long I live, no matter who I become, my heart will always leap at the sound of Alex's key in the door. But as God gives me the courage to accompany Alex into his future and to create mine boldly, I'll try to give up waiting and go out and meet life. Maybe a trip to Tierra del Fuego!

Anne Basye is a member of Unity Lutheran Church, Chicago, Ill.



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finding the

by Ingrid Christiansen

“All this Jesus said to the crowd in parables: indeed, he said nothing to them without a parable.”

Matthew 13:34

It was the paths that got them. Ordinary paths through the woods, going here and there—to a waterfall, to a garden, into the mountains, past lakes, even across the mountains to the other side. The paths became parables to them, and like all parables, the meaning of the parables grew and grew. On the first day they wondered, *“How can you tell what is a path, and what is just dirt on the forest floor?”*

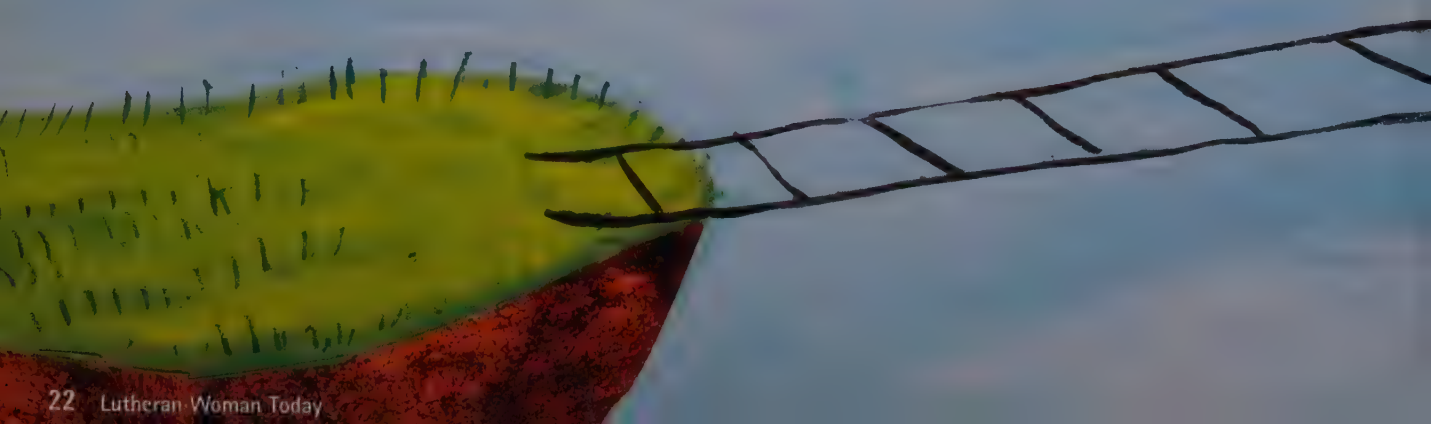
Who are these women who could not see paths? For a number of years, women recovering from prostitution at Genesis House in Chicago have gone on a spiritual retreat to Holden Village, the Lutheran retreat center in the Cascade Mountains. Many of them have never been outside the city limits of

Chicago—almost none of them have been on an airplane, or seen a mountain, a forest, or even a lake, although Chicago’s entire eastern boundary is Lake Michigan. When you are poor and abused, you stay on familiar turf, and that turf

is where the streets are rough, and life is marked by the crack house on the block, the shiny cars with suburban license plates on the corner, and a dingy apartment with too many kids in it. Going for a week into the wilderness is almost unfathomable. But go they do.

Where the path begins

The trip begins well before the trip, of course. At Genesis House, the residential treatment home where they are living, we talk together about clothes: What are appropriate clothes to wear on an airplane, in restaurants in Washington state, and most importantly,



Relay home



high up in the Cascade Mountains. Women who have worked the streets of Chicago for years as prostitutes have only a vague sense of what would be appropriate clothes.

That is one of the many skills they gain while spending a year in recovery from sex work. What *are* gym shoes, windbreakers?

In pre-trip preparation we also talk about fear: What will you do if you get lost in the airport in Chicago or in Seattle? The biggest fear these women have about going to the mountains is the fear of getting lost *in the woods* at Holden. Women who have no fear on the most dangerous streets in Chicago are tremendously afraid of losing their way in settings where many of us are confident. We talk together about bears, wolves, mosquitoes.

That they honestly have a hard time seeing a path through the woods is hard for us to understand. This teaches us—their “teachers”—a great deal about point of view, about seeing as a cultural experience. We began to wonder what our guests can see that we cannot.

It is easy to begin an experience such as this seeing too many *we/they* dichotomies. Interestingly to me, one who has taught at Holden many times and thrice directed their summer program, the women have no fear of *us*—the guests, staff, and teachers, Lutherans from Minnesota and Washington, from North Dakota and Pennsylvania, who inhabit Holden Village all summer. I’m not sure the same could be said of many of us, that we would not harbor a fear of these women whose lives have been so different from many of ours. One goal is to find common ground, mutual respect, and understanding. And even Christian community and some love.

Traveling companions

Once I was working with a Holden staff member preparing for the Genesis House women to arrive, and she asked me: “Are these prostitutes Christian?” I told her what one very broken, addicted woman working in prostitution once told me: She said, “Ingrid, I wouldn’t still *be* here, if Jesus didn’t love me.”

Because the women are all in recovery for addiction and prostitution, their days at Holden are very structured. The Genesis House staff who accompany them make a detailed plan for each day for each participant.

The women reside alongside the other guests, scattered among various lodges. They attend all the same sessions every other guest attends. When they are in Bible study, which is a popular early-morning class, they bring the stories of their lives to the discussion, just as all of the rest of us do in Bible study. We use the words of the Bible to illuminate our lives in ways that will give us relief from hurt, hope and focus for the future, and a sense of grace and forgiveness.

One day, Bishop Steve Ullestead from Iowa was leading the Bible study. A story he was working on involved the gates around a city. The Genesis House women immediately related to the idea of being barred from the central city, of being an outsider, not acceptable in the eyes of the public or of God. Their path stops at the gate, and they desperately want *in*. Other guests related their fear and avoidance of cities, and much laughter ensued at the differences in point of view.

As the Bible study neared its end, Bishop Ullestead had the group looking for the love and forgiveness of God in the story. One of the Genesis House women began to cry. She said her sins were too great, that she could not be forgiven. I was leaning over the edge of the balcony, just above the woman who had spoken so heartbreakingly about her sins. As I watched, an older woman from the prairie reached out and touched her shoulder. She whispered in a clearly audible whisper, “My sins are also great; I need to work on forgiving myself, too. Could we go for a walk after class?” Off they went after class, arm in arm, providing the comfort and solace of one Christian to another, down a new path for them both.

Overcoming roadblocks

Hiking is a big activity at Holden. Although our friends from Genesis House are called streetwalkers, hiking, indeed exercise of any sort, is not a big activity in their former way of life. While these women are in residence

at Holden, they are required by their staff to do four things each day: attend Bible study, volunteer in a Holden work area, attend daily worship, and take a significant walk or hike. The goal of the hiking requirement is for them to be ready by week's end to hike to Hart Lake, four miles up into the Railroad Creek valley. On the big day, they are full of trepidation. Each woman is concerned: Can I make it to Hart Lake? What will we find out there in the mountains, so far from this little village? What if we get lost? We don't know the way, we can't find the path.

Halfway to Hart Lake the path crosses a fast-flowing mountain stream, cold, deep, and ferocious-looking; a narrow bridge with no railings goes over it. On a recent hike, when we arrived at the stream and took out our morning snack, one woman, Kendra, began crying. She said she is afraid of heights, afraid of bridges, and afraid of water. She said she would have to go back, and she was afraid of going back alone, but she simply could not go on. The staff all looked worriedly at one another. Kendra was the least popular of the residents, and the staff were not surprised that she would "pull this stunt." As they talked among themselves about sending one staff member back with Kendra, the Genesis House residents sat down in a circle, held hands, and began to pray. After fervent prayer, they said to Kendra, we are going to go across that bridge holding hands, together. If one of us falls, we all fall. But we are not going anywhere without you. And they didn't.

That evening, in their reflection session, they were jubilant. They had all made it, including Sasha, who had severe asthma. But what pleased them the most was Kendra's triumph over her fears, and the triumph of the group over the divisiveness that Kendra had been representing until they all pulled together to help her over an enormous obstacle. It was at that point that the path had cleared, and they could continue on toward the goal.

The road to recovery

In one of the group's many discussions about paths, they began to realize that a path is a good metaphor for what they were going through in their recovery. They talked about how others had gone before, especially in AA and NA, and with the 12 steps had worn a path open for them. All they had to do was pay attention to those 12 steps and the way would be clear.

The next day, the group began to talk of Jesus as the maker of the path. They discussed how Jesus had worn a path clear for them, how they had only to look to the parables in the Bible to discern the way. Another day, as they spoke of avoiding bad influences, they noticed that there are many paths open to all of us. The important part is to be sure the path we choose has been worn by the right feet, the feet of the One we want to follow. When one woman spoke of huge obstacles in her path, they remembered the courage and prayer needed to cross the stream. They decided you did not need to abandon a path just because you encountered an obstacle on it.

As the parable of the paths grew, so did the distance we could hike on paths. We all grew in our faith, and the heart of Holden Village grew. The days at Holden are always rich, full of story and joy. It is no wonder, then, that other guests often come up to the staff from Genesis House and ask, "Which Bible study are the women going to tomorrow, because I want to go to that one. Their stories enrich the class so much." And we are all reminded again that we share the paths on which we walk, and the gifts along the way are many and great.

Ingrid Christiansen currently works as a mitigation specialist on capital murder cases, developing the life story of defendants in the hope that if the defendant is convicted the jury will assign a penalty short of death. She continues to serve on the board of Genesis House and to volunteer with women working in prostitution.


When I was growing up, my mother baked bread every Saturday morning. She baked many different kinds of bread—white, whole wheat, cinnamon raisin, rye—and I loved them all. To this day, the scent of dough rising or bread baking makes my mouth water. *by Linda Witte Henke*

The basic ingredients in bread are ordinary: flour, water, salt, and yeast. Each ingredient is essential, but the yeast is a necessary catalyst that awakens these simple ingredients to their potential for transformation into something both sustaining and delectable.

The bread-making process bears a certain resemblance to our journey through life. Dough must be conditioned by undergoing the stress and strain of kneading. Dough must have “sabbath time,” that is, it must rest, in order for mysterious internal processes to be set into motion. Rising dough must be protected from harmful conditions. And in order for the transformation into bread to be complete, dough must be subjected to intense heat.

The beauty of bread is realized when it is broken and shared at table. In fact, the English word “companion,” which comes from the Latin meaning “one who shares bread,” describes those who accompany us on life’s journey, offering support and sustenance. And yet, as fulfilling as it is to share bread with those near and dear to us, Scripture challenges us to embrace a more inclusive form of hospitality.

In the Old Testament, God directs Elijah to seek food from a poor widow in Zarephath (1 Kings 17:8–16). Elijah encounters the woman just as she is gathering sticks to build a fire and bake a final loaf



Life on Bread



Bread of Life

of bread before surrendering herself and her son to starvation. When the woman generously shares her meager provisions with Elijah, the three of them are not only companions to one another but also become witnesses to the abundance of God's providence.

In the New Testament, this fuller meaning of "companion" is experienced by two disciples when they sit at table with the One who had accompanied them on their journey along the Emmaus road. It was in the breaking and sharing of bread that the presence of the resurrected Christ was revealed to them. It is in the breaking and sharing of our bread that strangers become companions, and the presence of Christ is revealed within our midst.

The bread of life

Bread takes on even more significance when Jesus evokes it as a metaphor for himself: "I am the Bread of Life" (John 6:35). In our contemporary culture, bread tends to be a luxury, something we're quick to eliminate if we're watching our weight. But in cultures like Jesus', bread serves both as a dietary staple and as a kind of utensil for scooping up the rest of the meal. In many such cultures, the only way to eat the main course is with the bread, so when Jesus identifies himself as the Bread of Life, he is making the bold claim that he is the way to the main course, the means to full and abundant life in God.

Jesus shocked the people of his day by sitting at table with all manner of outcasts. It made no difference to him who you were, what you'd done, where you were from, or what language you spoke—no one was then or is now excluded from Jesus' invitation to gather at his table to feast on the Bread of Life. And Jesus' promise is clear: "Whoever eats of this bread will live forever" (John 6:51). As in Old Testament times when bread was shared to seal covenant relationships (Joshua 9:6, 15), the Bread of Life that God shares with us in Holy Communion brings assurance of the

new covenant that is ours through Christ Jesus. And even as the word *community* describes a group of people with a common characteristic, interest, or purpose, our weekly gatherings around common interest in Word and Sacrament shape us into faith communities of common characteristic and purpose.

Daily bread

For many years, biblical scholars were puzzled that in the Lord's Prayer, when Jesus instructs his followers to pray for *daily* bread, he uses a word that appears nowhere else in the Greek New Testament nor anywhere in classical Greek literature. In fact, some scholars were convinced that the Evangelist made it up . . . that is, until 1947, when the Dead Sea Scrolls were unearthed. There, among all the shards of pottery and scraps of papyrus, was some homemaker's shopping list of items she needed to purchase at the market. On that list was the mysterious word for "daily," used in such a way as to indicate a category of food that needed to be purchased every single day. Like the Old Testament manna that grew moldy at the end of each day (Exodus 16:20), the bread of Jesus' day spoiled quickly. "Give us today our daily bread" is a reminder of our daily dependence on God's good and faithful provision of everything necessary to sustain life.

A couple of months ago, my husband and I visited a congregation of a different denomination in our neighborhood. I confess that I wasn't too crazy about their order of service; I guess I'm a pretty deeply entrenched Lutheran after all. There was one thing, though, that the speaker said that just seared its way into my consciousness. He said something to the effect of, "maybe we need to pray less for all the hungry people of the world and pray more for those of us who have more food than we know what to do with."

As a nation we consume so much food that more than a third of our citizens are at least 20 pounds over-

weight, and we all know that our over-consumption goes way beyond food. We fill our lives with alcohol and drugs, with fancy vehicles and elaborate homes, with indulgent hobbies and sports obsessions, with promiscuous sex and shallow friendships, with excessive work and excessive play—the list goes on and on. Like that Old Testament manna, all the stuff we hoard is rotting in our hands. Nothing that we cram into our lives can even begin to quell the unrelenting hunger that gnaws within us (Isaiah 55).

Truth is, we are a hungry people, and God intends our hunger to be a gift that draws us to God's provision, to God's abundance, to God's own self—to the Bread of Life. But in order for our hunger to be the gift God intends it to be, in order for us to become attuned to our God-given hunger for the true bread that satisfies even hungry hearts, we must clear away all that stuff that promises to fill us and yet leaves us empty and hungering for more.

The same metaphor that offers wonderful insights for our understanding of who Jesus is also contributes much to our understanding of who God is calling us to be. We are a hungry people, called to gather often and to feast eagerly on the Bread of Life—to take it into our hands, to put it into our mouths, to chew it up, and swallow it so that it enters our bodies and permeates every cell of our beings.

But God does not give us the Bread of Life only for our personal pleasure or satisfaction. God gives us the Bread of Life so that the Body of Christ may be remembered and re-membered within and among us and so that, in this remembering and re-membering, we may become what we have been privileged to receive: the Bread of Life, broken and offered for the sake of a world that hungers endlessly for God.

Linda Witte Henke is a pastor, writer, and textile artist living in the Denver area.

READER CALL

IN WHAT WAYS DOES YOUR DAILY LIFE GIVE EVIDENCE OF GOD'S PRESENCE?

While visiting Jamaica, I was involved in a head-on collision with a tour bus. I remember racing ambulances, the emergency room, and fear. Fear of the unknown and fear for my life and my husband's—but also the fear of being alone. This aloneness was overwhelming. On the third day of my hospitalization, two young women appeared at the door of my room clutching their Bibles. At first I was unsure and perplexed at their presence here. However, I soon learned that while they could not afford to attend college, they had felt God's call to visit and minister to those hospitalized. They held my hand and prayed with me—the only foreigner in the hospital.

I felt unbelievably at peace. I had received a wonderful gift from two young strangers who, while not professionally trained, were filled with God's love and had surrendered to God's will to serve.

It wasn't until the spring 2003 that I realized why this scenario had returned to my thoughts time and

time again for 19 years. I was totally unaware of the Adjunct Chaplaincy Program at our local hospitals until a church friend became involved. Immediately, I knew that this was what I had been searching for; this was my homecoming.

Training and graduation followed. Soon I began my journey, walking the halls, checking the nurse's stations to see if I were needed, going in and out of the many cubicles in the Emergency Department, connecting with those within. I am there to respond to the needs of the patient, family, and staff; ready to talk, hold a hand, to call a friend or family member, ready to pray, to just listen or simply to be a quiet presence.

Fatigue follows these calls but the joy of the homecoming and ministering to those in need far outweighs the physical and emotional demands, and I give thanks for being allowed this humbling gift of chaplaincy. *Ellenor Eubanks Shepherd—Greensboro, N.C.*



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Helping Restart Lives

by Doris Strieter

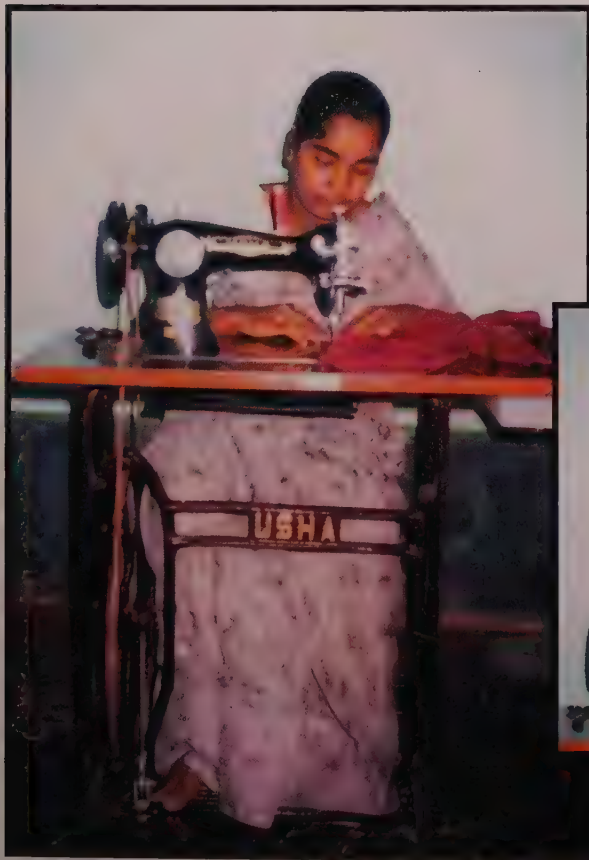
EACH YEAR WHEN THE WOMEN OF THE ELCA GRANTS COMMITTEE MEETS TO RECOMMEND PROJECTS FOR FUNDING, COMMITTEE MEMBERS WORK HARD TO ENSURE THAT GRANTS ARE AWARDED TO PROGRAMS THAT EMPOWER WOMEN TO RISE FROM EXTREME POVERTY TO A SUSTAINABLE LIVELIHOOD FOR THEMSELVES AND THEIR FAMILIES. NEMALA MARIYYAMMA IS ONE OF THESE WOMEN.

Nemala is a 25-year-old mother of one living in Tapeswaram, India. Recently her husband brought another woman into their home and drove out

Nemala and her nine-month-old daughter. Because her parents are also very poor, they were unable to take in Nemala and the baby. Fortunately, she came into contact with New Life Grace Ministries, a Christian organization that operates a tailoring and embroidery training center for women who are the sole support of their families. A small grant from Women of the ELCA provided start-up funding for New Life Grace Ministries and supported the purchase of 15 new sewing machines for women who complete the courses at the sewing center.

Nemala completed her training and with her new sewing machine is now making and selling enough clothing to support herself and her child. "Since the Lord showed me a path to be self-sufficient," says Nemala, "it is my desire to train at least three other destitute women, as this training will be able to provide them also with a good living."

The rural region around Tapeswaram is one in which poverty and its resulting social ills are the norm and in which many women like Nemala struggle for survival. It is a microcosm of places all over the world where people with limited resources scratch out an existence. The situation of widows and deserted women is especially desperate, and many of them resort to menial labor, begging, or prostitution in order to survive.



*Nemala Mariyyamma
sews and speaks of her
desire to help others.*



Nuthati Sharon Kumari

When illness strikes families here, survival becomes even more difficult. Nuthati Sharon Kumari knows first-hand what it's like to lose the family's source of income. Her husband was a quarry worker who supported Nuthati and her four children. Because of the constant inhalation of quarry dust, he contracted tuberculosis and has been bed-ridden for four years. The doctors told Nuthati that he should be given nourishing food and good medicines, but her income as a household maid was insufficient to provide both food and medicine. Now, however, Nuthati and her family can once again look forward to a positive future. After completing her tailoring classes at New Life Grace Ministries, she is now "in a position to afford both good food and medical aid to my husband and family."

Other women who completed the classes have similar stories to tell. Revu Ratna Kumari shared with us what she calls "The Story of My Success."

"I am 42 years old and the mother of a daughter and two sons. My husband was a truck driver making a good income and supporting our family. But he had one vice—he consumed alcohol in large quantities.

"Several years ago my husband went to work driving his truck while in a drunken state. Driving in a rash mood, he hit a heavy vehicle and was killed instantly. Because my husband was intoxicated at the time of the accident, I was not eligible to receive an insurance settlement from the trucking company, and my children and I became helpless.

"The president of New Life Grace Ministries saw my pitiable plight and allowed me to enter the training program, which I have completed. I stitch ladies' clothing and earn between 50 to 60 rupees [approximately \$1.25] each day. Now I am able to not only feed my children, but I have also enrolled them in the village school. I am grateful to everyone who helped me restart my life."

Helping restart lives is what New Life Grace Ministries is all about. Helping restart lives, especially women's lives, is also a priority of the Women of the ELCA Grants Program. Harriet Beecher Stowe once said that "women are the real architects of society." When women are empowered, all of society is strengthened.

The stories of Nemala, Nuthati, and Revu remind us that even in seemingly desperate situations there are always voices of hope who share the good news of the gospel of Jesus through their words and their actions and in so doing empower women around the world to be all that God intended them to be.



Revu Ratna Kumari

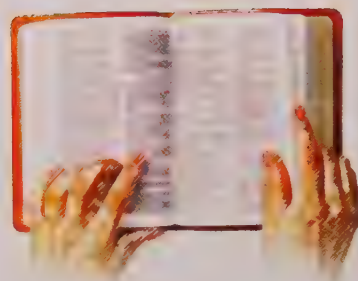
Doris Strieter is associate for programs, Women of the ELCA.

Please note: We cannot accept contributions to the New Life Grace Ministries because it is independent of Women of the ELCA. If you would like to support other projects that empower women around the world and help create stronger communities, contact Doris Strieter, associate for programs, at 800-638-3522, ext. 2465, for information on the Women of the ELCA Grants Program. Your financial support can make a positive difference in so many lives. Consider calling today.

Session 1

God in the Everyday

by Audrey West



Study text

Matthew 13:31–35 (the parables of the mustard seed and yeast)

Theme verse

“I will open my mouth to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world.” (Matthew 13:35)

Overview

The parables of Jesus use activities and events from everyday life to impart important, sometimes shocking teachings. Seven parables are collected in chapter 13 of the Gospel of Matthew. This chapter is a long discourse about the kingdom of heaven. We will examine two parables from this chapter, particularly the one about a bread-baking woman, to discern the miraculous and hidden growth of something small and ordinary into the all-embracing realm of God.

Opening

Hymn: “Open My Eyes, That I May See”

Text and tune: Clara H. Scott

Open my eyes, that I may see
Glimpses of truth Thou hast for me;
Place in my hands the wonderful key
That shall unclasp and set me free.

Silently now I wait for Thee,
Ready, my God, Thy will to see;
Open my eyes, illumine me, Spirit divine!

Name two or three of your everyday activities. Which of these activities do you especially enjoy or appreciate, and why?

Ordinary people, ordinary lives

Read Matthew 13:31–35. A man plants seeds, a woman kneads dough: ordinary, everyday activities for most people in ancient Palestine and even today in much of the world. Although stories from the Bible may seem strange or exotic to modern readers, most of them actually involve people engaged in familiar, ordinary events: tending to their households, working at their jobs, traveling, celebrating marriages. The writers of the biblical texts captured for later generations the activity of God in these ordinary, very human events.

The parables in the New Testament are story-riddles about people doing ordinary things. It is through these stories of everyday activities that Jesus teaches his followers important truths about themselves, about the world, and about God.

Genesis 18:1–8 tells us a story about Abraham and Sarah. One hot day, old Abraham is sitting beside his tent when three strangers drop by. Abraham welcomes them according to the custom

of the day: He brings water to wash their feet, invites them to rest in the shade of a tree, and offers them a meal. His wife Sarah, inside the tent, prepares food. Mixing together three measures of flour (just like the woman in Jesus' parable!), she makes bread-cakes for the guests.

In many ways, the scene is ordinary: a hospitable old couple sharing food with visitors. What Sarah and Abraham do not know—though the reader knows—is that the three visitors are anything but ordinary. They are actually messengers from God, sent to deliver the amazing news that Sarah will give birth to a son in her old age. In the ordinary acts of preparing and sharing a meal, Abraham and Sarah receive God's extraordinary promise.

GO DEEPER: THE GOSPEL OF MATTHEW

Read the Gospel of Matthew, in one sitting if possible. (Settle down with a cup of coffee or your favorite beverage, and read the whole book. It's good reading.) As you read, jot down some notes. Pay attention to recurring themes or images, as well as the picture of Jesus that develops. You might also note things you expected to find but did not, since each of the Gospels is different. For example, there is no mention of shepherds in the fields on the night of Jesus' birth, and when the wise men arrive in Bethlehem, they find Mary and Joseph and the baby Jesus in a house, not a stable (2:11). We will dig into some of the characteristic elements of Matthew in this and the next three study sessions.

The kingdom of heaven = the reign of God

Most of the parables in Matthew, including the ones we read in this session, compare everyday people, events, or things to the *kingdom of heaven*, which is a translation of the original Greek *basileia ton ouranon* (pronounced *bah-si-LAY-ah tone oo-rah-n-OWN*).

"The kingdom of heaven may be compared to someone who sowed good seed" (13:24); "The kingdom of heaven is like a mustard seed" (13:31); "The kingdom of heaven is like a net that was thrown into the sea" (13:47); "The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king" (22:2).

In the New Testament, only the Gospel of Matthew and the Book of Revelation use the phrase *kingdom of heaven*. When the Gospels of Mark and Luke recount the parable of the mustard seed or other parables, they say *kingdom of God* rather than *kingdom of heaven*. In the Gospel of John, Jesus doesn't speak in parables, although he uses similar patterns of speech, such as "I am the good shepherd." John's Gospel uses the word *kingdom* only three times, compared to 52 times in Matthew. For Matthew, the phrase *kingdom of heaven* is almost a password; if you want to know you're reading Matthew, look for *kingdom of heaven*.

One of the difficulties with translating *basileia ton ouranon* as *kingdom of heaven* (as we have done here) is that it can lead us to think of the "kingdom" as a location, a place where God lives, "up there in heaven." However, the phrase carried a much richer meaning in the Jewish circles of the Old Testament and Matthew's Gospel. There, the word *basilea* does not primarily mean a territory or place, but rather the intangible "reign" or "rule." The word *heaven* in "*basileia of heaven*" is a way of referring to God without using the sacred name, as is still customary among religious Jews. Thus, *basileia ton ouranon* may be more precisely translated as "reign of God" or "God's rule."

1. Look up the following passages in Matthew and briefly list the things to which the kingdom of heaven is compared. What do these comparisons tell you about the nature of God's reign?

Passage in Matthew	The kingdom of heaven is like:
13:24	Someone who sowed good seed in the field
13:31	
13:33	
13:44	
13:45	
13:47	
18:23	
22:2	
25:1	

Microseeds and megatrees

Read Matthew 13:31–32 (the parable of the mustard seed). In real life, a mustard plant, known for its tiny seeds (see Matthew 17:20), grows two to six feet in height, or sometimes a little taller. It is not a tree, despite what the parable says. But the image of a great tree that shelters the birds of the air is familiar from the Old Testament, that is, from the texts that were Jesus’ Scriptures. Daniel 4:9–18, for example, describes a tree of great height which provides food for all: It shades the animals of the field while the birds of the air nest in its branches. Ezekiel 31:3–9 compares Pharaoh, king of Egypt, to the greatness of a towering cedar tree, whose top is among the clouds and whose roots sink into the primeval deep. The tree is vast enough to protect all creatures: “All the birds of the air made their nests

in its boughs; under its branches all the animals of the field gave birth to their young; and in its shade all great nations lived.” These Old Testament passages, together with others (for example, Psalm 104:16 and Ezekiel 17:23) make use of the metaphor of the great sheltering tree to represent a powerful kingdom or authority. The great tree is raised up by God, and it is God’s to bring down.

Readers of the Hebrew Scriptures (our Old Testament) would have recognized the contrast between the humble mustard plant in Matthew’s parable and the majestic cedar trees. The ordinary plant, small as it is, will become a tree in the fullness of God’s reign.

2. Consider the following possible interpretations (suggested by a variety of scholars)¹ of the parable of the mustard seed:

- a. The parable represents a claim about the church: Although it started with only a small band of motley disciples, it will eventually grow to shelter and nourish the whole world.
- b. The parable refers to the end time, when all creation ("the birds of the air") will come to Christ.
- c. The parable highlights an ordinary garden herb as a symbol of ordinary, unimportant people of faith who have world-changing potential.
- d. The parable emphasizes the mustard as a weed, an undesirable plant that can take over the garden. In this view, God's reign overturns conventional society, bringing the "undesirables" (represented by the weed) into the center.

Which interpretation seems most compelling to you? Or suggest an alternative interpretation.

Whatever the particular interpretation—and parables by nature invite more than one interpretation!—one thing is clear. Not only does a tiny seed grow into a mighty tree, but a veritable weed—planted on purpose—produces a plant that can shelter all living creatures. This is what the *basileia* of heaven is like!

A woman hides yeast

3. Read Matthew 13:33. What is for you the most striking or significant element of this short parable? The yeast? The woman? Her act of mixing the yeast into the dough? The large quantity of flour?

On first reading, this parable appears to be simply a retelling of the parable of the mustard seed: Tiny grains of yeast grow to leaven a large amount of dough. Certainly this is one aspect of the parable.

BASILEIA OF HEAVEN

Matthew asserts the importance of the *basileia* from the beginning of his Gospel, as early as the genealogy (1:1–16), which includes Israel's great king David and several other kings after him. Jesus' birth as "king of the Jews" is a threat to the earthly reign of King Herod, who tries to destroy the child (2:3, 13–16). When John the Baptist proclaims his message of repentance, he declares that "the kingdom of heaven has come near" (3:2), a proclamation repeated by Jesus at the beginning of his ministry (4:17) and by his disciples

when they are sent out to preach (10:7). Clearly, God's *basileia* is central to the message of Jesus. It is God's activity in the world—indeed, in the ordinary, everyday occurrences of the world—manifested in the life of Jesus and his followers.

For the people who first heard Jesus' message, it would be virtually impossible to hear the word *basileia* without thinking of the greatness of David's reign long ago and then of the hated Roman imperial rule. They were well acquainted with kings and kingdom language and would recognize in the word *kingdom* a ref-

erence to both sacred and profane realms. Jesus' proclamation of the *basileia* of heaven offered a different kind of rule, characterized by the words and deeds of Jesus.

This *basileia* of heaven has already existed, it is fully present, and it is yet to come. In the Sermon on the Mount (5:3–12), Jesus declares that the *basileia* of heaven already belongs to the poor in spirit and to those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake. At the same time, he can also pray for God's *basileia* to come (6:10). Clearly the *basileia* of heaven cannot be fixed in time; rather, it encompasses all of time.

However, if we slow down and look again, we may notice other details that can deepen our understanding of the image of yeast and its use in this parable.

“The kingdom of heaven is like yeast . . .”

We know about yeast. It’s the stuff that makes bread rise, and that seems to be its primary function in this parable. What we may not know about yeast is that wherever else it appears in the Old and New Testaments, it symbolizes something unholy or corrupt (see, for example, Exodus 12:15–20, 34; Leviticus 2:11). The same is true in Matthew’s Gospel: “Jesus said, ‘Watch out, and beware of the yeast of the Pharisees and Sadducees’ ” (Matthew 16:6, see also 16:11). It is surprising, then, that Jesus makes yeast a symbol of something as mighty and holy as the reign of God: There’s a new twist on an old image! God works to bring about the *basileia* in astounding ways, ways that do not conform to our expectations.

WOMEN IN PARABLES

You might read some other images from the parables in the Gospel of Matthew that reflect women or women’s work in the first century. How do these images influence your perception or experience of God?

The ten bridesmaids (25:1–13)

A person sewing a patch (9:16)

A person spinning thread (6:28–30)

A mother hen (23:37–39)

4. Have you ever recognized God’s work to bring about the *basileia* in something that might be considered “contaminating”? What was it?

“ . . . that a woman took . . . ”

In most English translations of the Bible, this parable is called the parable of the yeast or the parable of the leaven. Both titles (headings added to modern translations of the Bible, not part of the original texts) tend to obscure the fact that it is a woman who symbolizes God’s action in the world. As a way of emphasizing the woman’s presence in the parable, some scholars recently have begun to refer to the story as the parable of the bakerwoman or the parable of the woman baking bread.

5. What difference does it make for you to see or experience God in the image of a woman? What characteristics of God are made clearer for you when you picture God as the bakerwoman?

“ . . . and mixed in with . . . ”

The English translation obscures it, but the original Greek verb used here means “to encrypt” or “to hide.” The bakerwoman has not simply mixed yeast together with flour but has hidden the yeast in the flour. No one can tell what kind of bread this will be: leavened or unleavened. However, invisible and unnoticed, the yeast does its work, until the results are obvious to all (imagine all that risen dough!).

The hiddenness of God’s *basileia* is a thread woven through several parts of this Gospel. “Nothing is secret [Greek: hidden] that will not become known” (10:26). “I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and have revealed them to infants” (11:25). “The kingdom of heaven is like treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid” (13:44). Perhaps the most significant thread in the tapestry that is Matthew’s Gospel is the quotation from Isaiah that appears at the end of our study passage: “I will open my mouth

A SNAPSHOT OF LIFE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

In an agrarian society, survival depends on the production of food. Fields must be planted and harvested, grain must be milled into flour, and flour must be made into bread. The peasant farmers who heard these parables of Jesus would have been intimately acquainted with the work of

sowing seed and baking bread, since these were essential to the family's survival. Scholars suggest that home bread-baking was a communal event; neighbor women gathered together to share the work. Ancient peasant families lived in small dwellings clustered around a central courtyard, often in extended family groups. The courtyard was where women could collaborate in the

daily work of food preparation, including the mixing and baking of bread. Their shared labor would have made it possible to produce a great deal of bread at one time, enough for several families. The three measures of flour mentioned in the parable of the bakerwoman may reflect this ordinary practice of women baking together, sharing the work to produce enough food for all their families.²

to speak in parables; I will proclaim what has been hidden from the foundation of the world" (13:35). From the hidden yeast, mounds of dough will rise. From the hidden meaning of parable-riddles, the *basileia* will be revealed.

"... three measures of flour until all of it was leavened."

We may not realize that according to the ancient weights and measures, three measures of flour is a lot of flour—fifty or sixty pounds, enough to feed a hundred people! This seems like an outrageous amount of bread to be made by one woman. The three measures of flour remind us of Sarah's preparations for the heavenly visitors (Genesis 18:1–8, mentioned above), an extravagant feast that also included a whole calf. Closer to home in Matthew's Gospel, recall that Jesus feeds more than five thousand people with five loaves of bread and two fish (14:13–21). Just a short while later, seven loaves and a few small fish are plenty for more than four thousand (15:32–38), and, in both feedings, so much is left over that the scraps are collected by the

basketful! Food enough for many and more, just like the three measures of flour. This is the astounding extravagance of God's *basileia*.

6. Consider what you have learned about the elements of the parable of the bakerwoman. What meanings are suggested to you by this parable?

7. How do the images in our two parables—seed sower and bread baker—work together to tell you something about God and God's realm? Write a short prayer (two or three sentences) to "God the bakerwoman," taking account of the characteristics and interpretations you developed in questions 5 and 6, above.

Closing

8. Think back to the opening exercise of the study (about your everyday activities). In what ways might the character of God be recognized in the activity you have mentioned? If you wish, compose a one-or two-sentence parable using your activity: "The *basileia* of heaven is like . . ."

EMBODYING THE PARABLE

How might you or your congregation put the messages of this parable of the bakerwoman into action? The following suggestions might be a good starting point. Feel free to develop your own ideas!

1. **Volunteer** at a soup kitchen or food pantry, where the sharing of bread can symbolize God's care for the world and our care for one another.
2. **Participate** in a community gleaning program (where volunteers glean produce from farmers' fields or leftover food from grocers

and restaurants and donate it to local food pantries and shelters), if one exists in your area.

3. **Make a list** of the talents and skills represented in your study group (for example, baking, book-keeping, home repair, driving, crafts) and offer these to your congregation for a Time and Talents Day.

Conclude your study with this reading from Isaiah 55:8–12, which captures the joy to be found in the *basileia* of heaven, followed by the prayer that you wrote in question 7, above.

For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the LORD.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.

For as the rain and the snow come down from
heaven, and do not return there until they have
watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth;
it shall not return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

For you shall go out in joy,
and be led back in peace;

the mountains and the hills before you
shall burst into song, and all the trees of the field
shall clap their hands.

Looking ahead

Next month we head to the fields in the parable of the generous boss, or, as it is usually called, the parable of the workers in the vineyard (Matthew 20:1–16). Find out how the laborers respond when their boss pays a good day's wage to everybody who works for him. In God's economy, the ordinary way of doing business does not apply!

Audrey West is assistant professor of New Testament at the Lutheran School of Theology at Chicago.

Notes

1. See, for example, Barbara E. Reid, *Parables for Preachers*, pp. 296–97; Richard N. Longenecker, *The Challenge of Jesus' Parables*, p. 114; David Buttrick, *Speaking Parables*, pp. 74–78.
2. See Holly Heron and Antoinette Clark Wire, "Women's Work in the Realm of God (Mt. 13:33; Lk. 13:20), in *The Lost Coin: Parables of Women, Work and Wisdom*, ed. Mary Ann Beavis (London and New York: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002), pp. 136–57.

TELL US ABOUT COMMUNITY SERVICE PROJECTS THAT YOUR
WOMEN'S GROUP ORGANIZES OR PARTICIPATES IN.

We make school bags for Lutheran World Relief. One of the local furniture stores offered us out-dated drapery samples. We found that they worked great for the school bags. And while both sides might not be exactly alike, we match them quite well. This past Christmas, we also made one bag for each of our nursing home residents to go on their walkers or wheelchairs.

Grace Olien—Oakes, N.D.

Grace Lutheran Church

The Cut-Ups Circle has established a project of producing cooling ties. They are made from strips of cloth similar to camouflage uniforms. Polymer crystals are added as a cooling agent, and then the material is sewn together into a neck tie. This group has made over 300 pieces that have been sent to Iraq for the military men and women to keep them cool in the harsh summer weather. A local Vietnam Veterans group organized the delivery of the ties.

Sheri Moehling—North Port, Fla.

Living Waters Lutheran Church

Eleven years ago, the Sarah Circle began a monthly Thrift Shop to raise money for local charities. The Thrift Shop continues to attract a large following in the community and fosters fellowship among the hard-working Women of the ELCA members and friends. Through 2003, we earned about \$4,000 each year, which has enabled us to donate annually to local charitable groups such as: the Passaic County Interfaith Hospitality Network, St. Peter's Haven, Eva's Shelter, First Presbyterian Church Food Bank in downtown Passaic, the Presbyterian Church Parish Nursing Program (interfaith) which serves our local hospitals, and the Salvation Army in downtown Passaic. All our Thrift Shop stock is donated and our prices are the lowest in the area. We have many repeat customers who enjoy spending one to two hours shopping and talking with us.

Margaret Franklin—Passaic, N.J.

St. John's Lutheran Church

this month's
QUESTION

Go to www.lutheranwomantoday.org to enter your response.
(Results will appear in the January/February 2005 issue.)

Q: Have you used the information in the Action & Advocacy Guide located in each issue of *Lutheran Woman Today*?

- A. Yes.
- B. No.

Results from Question of the Month

(April 2004)

Q: I find examples of God's work in my daily life most often . . .

Here's what you said:

37.2% Through the people I meet every day

29.5% When I witness splendor in nature

10.3% When I receive answers to my prayers

23.1% When I give of myself

ARTICLE-RELATED LINKS

Intercessor: Praying on Behalf of Others (page 6)

The ELCA Division for Congregational Ministry explains the importance of prayer.

www.elca.org/dcm/evangelism/prayer/intro.html

To build or grow a Prayer ministry in your congregation, check out this site. www.prayingchurch.org/prayermin.html

Join other Women of the ELCA for Prayer each Monday at Noon. www.womenoftheelca.org/whatwedo/praymon.html

Listening to God: Everyday Discernment (page 12)

To obtain copies of the special resource Debra Farrington has written for Women of the ELCA, go to www.womenoftheelca.org/resources or contact resource specialist Laura Barkenquast at 800-638-3522 ext. 2737.

Information for Debra Farrington's books or for her speaking schedule can be found at

www.debrafarrington.com

Listening to God: A Guide to Discernment, by Debra K. Farrington (code 6-0001-9376-9; \$6.95), is available through Augsburg Fortress Publishers (800-328-4648).

Women of the ELCA has eight programs especially for women's groups that offer a wide variety of opportunities to explore together what God is calling them to be and to do. Each reflects on the "Listen, God Is Calling" theme for the 2002-2005 triennium. All eight of these resources in the *Called to...* series are available in downloadable PDF format at www.womenoftheelca.org. They are also available from the 2004-2005 Resource Catalog of Women of the ELCA, mailed to every congregation in April 2004; the catalog (code 6-0002-1116-3) is also available through Augsburg Fortress Publishers (800-328-4648).

Finding the Way Home (page 22)

Readers who wish to learn more about Genesis House or Holden Village can look online at the Web site for each place (www.geneshouse.org and www.holdenvillage.org).

If you or someone you care about is looking for help, call Genesis House toll free at 888-353-3456. You may also contact them directly at other numbers listed on the Genesis House site.

Women of the ELCA articles about commercial sexual trafficking

Café—Stirring the Spirit Within

See the May/June/July 2004 issue

www.womenoftheelca.org/cafe/

Women of the ELCA announces a new resource titled *Day Full of Light: Ending Commercial Sexual Exploitation*. This is a free resource that may be obtained by contacting resource specialist Laura Barkenquast at 800-638-3522 ext. 2737.

2003 grant recipients work towards ending Commercial Sexual Exploitation.

www.womenoftheelca.org/whatwedo/03grantawards.html

The ELCA message about Commercial Sexual Trafficking. www.elca.org/dcs/commercial_sexual_exploitation.html

Resources for combating Commercial Sexual Exploitation www.elca.org/jle/bibliographies/commercial_sexual_exploitation_resources.html

For more information about Commercial Sexual Trafficking and the Prostitution of Children, go to:

www.adultssavingkids.org and www.missingkids.com

Women of the ELCA Grants Program Helping Restart Lives (page 30)

Women of the ELCA supports local and international organizations that positively affect women around the world. See the current list of grant recipients.

www.womenoftheelca.org/whatwedo/03grantawards.html



GRACE NOTES

Living in the Sacred

by Linda Post Bushkofsky

TIME AND TIME AGAIN I TURN TO SPIRITUAL LITERACY:

Reading the Sacred in Everyday Life, by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat. Using many quotations organized around categories such as places, nature, creativity, and service, the authors present a thoughtful guide to incarnate living. "Spiritual literacy is the ability to read the signs written in the texts of our own experiences," say the Brussats, giving us the ability to "locate within [our] daily life points of connection with the sacred."

Sometimes our connections with the sacred are not hard to discern. A rainbow after a storm reminds us of God's promise to Noah. Other connections are not recognized so easily. To help us practice finding the sacred in everyday life, the Brussats built an "alphabet of spiritual literacy." Here are a few of their entries.

A is for attention. We are called to stay awake and alert. By paying attention we can more likely see the sacred in our everyday lives.

B is for being present. We are called to live in the present, worrying about neither the past nor the future. Be open to God in the here and now.

L is for listening. Truly listen to others and to yourself. Even the stones cry out. What do you hear when you listen to God's creation?

O is for openness. The Brussats offer a wonderful image here. "Hold an open house in your heart [and I would add, mind] for all people and all things."

September brings the start-up of many congregational units that have taken a summer break. Monthly meetings can become so routine that we move through them mechanically. Think about ways to plan your

time together so that the sacred can be recognized.

Create a sacred space at your meeting. Cover a surface with a beautiful fabric. Set out a vase of fresh flowers or a potted plant. Add a candle. Start and end your time together with the sounding of a singing bowl.

Allow for fellowship time so women can talk with one another and learn of God's presence (or absence) in each other's lives. Practice being present to one another and truly listening.

As you gather in prayer, encourage each person to recall that day's activities with gratitude, and offer thanks for special pleasures. God was present in the laugh of a child or the soaring flight of an eagle.

Add a basket to your sacred space and encourage women to offer up Thankofferings for God's presence and the blessings of the day. (Thankofferings can be collected any time; they aren't restricted to autumn services.)

Perhaps you gather in other settings. If you gather in service, such as in altar care, use these same principles. Pay attention, remain open, and you will encounter God as you polish the chalice or iron the fair linen.

These practices are not just activities. No, they are a way of life, part of being a disciple. You begin by being intentional about finding God in the everyday and over time these practices become second nature. Soon you will see the sacred in everything and everyone and everywhere. May it be so.

Linda Post Bushkofsky is executive director of Women of the ELCA.



A M E N !

Fertile faith

by Catherine Malotky

LAST FALL, ALMOST A YEAR AGO NOW, I DOVE INTO MY PERENNIALS WITH SPRING IN MIND. MANY HAD BEEN IN PLACE FOR SEVERAL YEARS AND WERE IN NEED OF DIVIDING. AND, OF COURSE, SINCE I HAD LIVED WITH MY GARDEN THROUGH THE GROWING SEASON, THERE WERE PLACES AND PLANTS THAT NEEDED RE-ARRANGING JUST BECAUSE.

I remember, God, the excitement of seeing those first shoots come up. Spring is such a miracle in the world when you love perennials. In spring, I never remember all the work I did the fall before, and last spring was no exception. "Oh," I muttered, poking around the new growth and plucking weed seedlings, "What did I put in there?" Or, "That's what I did with that!" Or, "That's going to look great!" Or, "Now, what was that again?" Generally this last musing is over some plant picked up on sale late in the fall, price cut to the bone, barely alive, and now springing into life seemingly with no memory of its precarious fall season.

So goes my spring, God. Now, as summer wanes, I look out at my small garden and I am amazed. I have ideas for next year, and soon it will be time to take out the trowel and dig and fuss. But for now, I am amazed by the memories I have of this summer's blooms. I am struck by the steady ebb and flow of sunlight. I am quieted by the bounty of this beauty.

Similarly, when I head out into the countryside, I remember the still, black fields of winter and early spring. Yet, what I see now is fields bursting with

growth—towering corn, soybean plants bushing right across the space between them, wheat waving gracefully, or the space where peas were harvested earlier, or hay ready to be cut once more.

The apple trees are heavy with fruit in my back yard. The plums and tart cherries, the grapes, and the tomatoes are almost ready.

What can I make of this, God? Your largess is overwhelming. The sturdiness, the reliability of your creation is so good for my soul. And this, God, is like your reign for which we long? This abundance? This faithfulness? This everyday grace? This slow but steady fertility?

I know the creation can also be a terrible thing. There are tornadoes and blizzards and hail and floods. I know we humans can decimate the world you have imagined into being, and we do, but it remains remarkably resilient. The powers of nature unleashed frighten us all when we are in their path, yet a storm can bring a fresh start, even renewal, in time.

Open me, God, to the wondrous cycle of your creation. Wrap me in the beauty that surrounds me, the miracles, the awe. Give me the grace to be so fertile, to grow in your abundance and give myself and my joy to those who need a glimpse of you. Amen

Catherine Malotky serves the ELCA Board of Pensions as representative to several synods in the Upper Midwest. An ordained pastor, she has also been an editor, teacher, parish pastor, and retreat leader.

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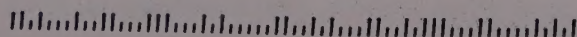
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